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Marketing Theory 2009; 9; 439

DOI: 10.1177/1470593109346896

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I just tend to wear what I like: contemporary consumption and the paradoxical construction of individuality

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Abstract. *Recent theoretical arguments about the inter-locking of identity and consumption pose a challenge to individuality. We explore this initially through literatures relating to the paradox that arises from the role of the (fashion) code and the use of social groupings in the production of the self through consumption practices. Then we explore individuality through narrative data collected by multiple methods in two studies. Detailed analysis of consumption accounts shows the marking of one's individuality to be an important, if often precarious, accomplishment. Rhetorical devices we associate with this accomplishment include the rejection of the dictates of mass fashion and branding, the development of a personal choice rationale and the definition of the self as somehow different from a mass other. We argue that the consumer paradox exists but is more or less successfully resolved through such devices. In resolution of the paradox we suggest that while the consumer collective is semiotically represented, representations of individuality are adequately and locally narrated.* **Key Words** ● consumers ● identity ● 'individual' and 'other' ● narrative ● paradox

Introduction

The extent of recent debate throughout the social sciences shows identity to be a highly contested but also important concept. Social changes have loosened identity from its traditional locations (Giddens, 1984; Bauman, 1996; Hall and du Gay, 1996; Beck, 1999). Social theories have also been advanced that argue against an

essentialist reading of identity.¹ Despite divergence in contemporary perspectives on identity, a surface affinity across a swathe of work can be found in the rejection of the idea of a given identity alongside a growing interest in identity as constructed or produced. Many who reject the idea of identity as a fixed and coherent essence nevertheless endorse the notion of identity or a feeling of selfhood as a central and necessary feature of everyday life (Taylor, 1989). Suggested requirements of this sense of selfhood include a sense of coherence, continuity and authenticity (Baumeister and Wilson, 1996; McAdams, 1996). Individuality has also been posited such that the self should 'fit in with' yet be differentiated from others, so that the self is distinctive and exhibits some degree of autonomy. Other social theorists place less emphasis upon the importance of coherence and continuity in identity work. Such theorists incline more to a post-modernist view in which the fluidity of identity allows for a liberatory combining of contradictory and temporary means of identification which need not be reconciled (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

The dislocation of identity from its traditional anchor provided by an occupational or ownership role in production has been accompanied by increasing research attention directed to the relationship between consumption and identity. This has been fuelled also by the centrality given to consumption in the organization of society. Baudrillard's critique of consumer society (1996 [1968] and 1998 [1970]) stresses the ever-increasing abundance of mass goods and services, such that sign value is organized in an intensifying dynamic of creation, re-creation and collapse. This critique represents an important departure point for much of the work on consumer identities. In such circumstances, individually and culturally narrated identity projects become, arguably, more open but also more demanding.

Subsequent work diverges regarding, for example, the authenticity (Thompson and Haytko, 1997) or inauthenticity (Murray, 2002) of manufactured signs, the degree of consumer creativity (Rocamora, 2002; Cova et al., 2007) or dependence on producer marketed signs (McCracken, 1986) and sign superficiality (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]; Bauman, 2001) or social meaning (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Our interest is in work that incorporates views of the consumer society with the construction of a sense of self. This work raises several questions that remain contested especially since, as we have noted, there are alternative views on the very idea of a stable and coherent self. Is a sense of self and of individuality forged through the consumption of widely available goods? What part does differentiation from others play in forging this sense of self? Similarly, what part is played by association with others? We address these questions in this paper through a reading of empirical material.

The first section draws upon extant literature to flesh out the relationship between identity and consumption, and in particular to highlight the different lines of argument used to address the questions we have posed. The second section moves to our research through explaining our methodology and introducing the studies and participants on which our analysis is based. The third section contains our analysis. The final section summarizes our arguments in returning to the questions that motivated our writing.

Individuality, identity and consumption

In the extensive debate about identity, consumer researchers from a diverse range of perspectives continue to assert the importance of consumption as the means through which we construct self (Belk, 1988), from which others draw inferences about our identity (Greenwald, 1989) and through which we can envisage and try possible identities (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Elliott, 1997; Featherstone, 2000). Such conceptualizations imply, and it is central to Baudrillard's (1996 [1968]) argument, that consumption functions as a language (albeit impoverished) through which we converse and communicate with others. The 'language' of the sign demands a form of literacy so that, to be able to participate appropriately in the conversation of consumerism, consumers must understand 'the code' (Baudrillard, 1996 [1968]), that is the coherent but dynamic arrangement of arbitrary meanings attached to objects. The self is seen as marking identity through the selection, combination and, sometimes, creative use or subversion of objects of mass production and marketing. These ubiquitous products are carriers of powerful images and we select certain of these from amongst other similar ones to fashion individual identities.²

The construction of a feeling of individual identity rests, therefore, upon 'social affirmation' and 'social approval', and this raises a central consumption paradox. 'Individuality depends upon social conformity; the struggle of individual personality can only be sustained by means of intersubjective exchange' (Bauman, 1991: 201). This paradox goes beyond identifying our dependence upon a common stock of goods in the construction of individuality to assert a dependence upon a shared stock of knowledge. Thus what Featherstone (2000) describes as 'total otherness' would not serve the semiotic purpose.

Whether consumers are seen as bound by the consumer paradox, with its emphasis upon reference to a shared code, depends upon the extent to which researchers subscribe to two schools of thought. These are outlined by Murray (2002) as 'sign experimentation' and 'sign domination' and relate to the agency-structure debate. Under 'sign experimentation' the semantic codes surrounding consumption goods are open discursive systems so that consumers are able to construct style. Limits to this are recognized, however. Murray (2002), for example, draws an analogy between style creativity and the creative speaking of a language, thus drawing attention to the need to lock into certain established if contested meanings. The alternative view of 'sign domination' stresses instead primary socialization so that the sign value of consumer goods is institutionalized. The former view places some weight upon consumer agency and portrays the post-modern consumer as a bricoleur in the free building of identities through the market (Firat and Schultz, 1997; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). The latter view, which is more in keeping with Baudrillard's (1998 [1970]: 80) assertion that consumption pleasure is a 'duty of the citizen' and Simmel's (1972) and Bourdieu's (1984) reading of 'fashion'/'taste' as a class project, emphasizes arbitrary structure as the dominant aspect in the creation of individual identity. Baudrillard dismisses resistance since 'even actions that resist the code are carried out in relation to a society that conforms to it' (Baudrillard, 1988: 19).

The contradictory evidence regarding the role of sign domination or sign experimentation in the construction of apparent individuality therefore remains lodged in an insoluble question regarding the dependence of experimentation upon sign domination.

Empirical evidence from consumption research provides mixed support for these two views. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) broadly support, and Gould and Lerman (1998) partially support, the importance of long-standing narratives in consumer stories, thus giving some importance to structure. Thompson and Haytko (1997) offer a view of consumers who appropriate consumer goods that are endowed with dominant, long-standing meanings yet do so in creative ways to produce individual 'modernist' narratives. Cova et al. (2007) and Cova and Cova (2002) provide a view of the quest for individuality that, interestingly, reverses generally accepted practice. In contrast, then, to the widespread emphasis upon differentiation in critiques of post-modern society, and drawing on Maffesoli (1995 [1988]), they argue that de-differentiation underlies 'linking value' and drives certain forms of consumption associated with the tribes through which we mark identities. This view of tribal consumption subscribes to the importance of 'a code' but rejects the totalized version of 'the code'. Meanings are localized and temporary thus allowing for 'semi-individual' experimentation. Thus Goulding, Shankar and Elliott report of consumers within the 'new communities' formed around UK dance clubs: 'There was a strong desire to be perceived as individual, having a look while at the same time conforming to the norms of the group' (Goulding et al., 2002: 271). Thus group 'membership' can be defined in non-traditional ways. The view does not preclude the shifting nature of identity (Cova, 1997) although some analyses envisage greater stability than others.

The ongoing debate about the social practices through which consumers' identities are forged is matched by debate about the level at which differentiation and, therefore, the construction of identity occurs. The 'individuation thesis' (Giddens, 1984; Beck, 1999) emphasizes the extent to which the individual has become responsible for their own biography in what they refer to as second-modernity. Any marking out of the self from an assumed mass (the other) is at least in part an onerous task (Bauman, 1996). By contrast, theorists of a post-modern condition often emphasize the continuous shifting and free redefinition of identities (Firat and Schultz, 1997; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In either formulation consumers are 'players in meaning construction' (Firat and Dholakia, 2006: 140) and collectively perform 'semiotic work' (Hall, 1997) as 'effortful accomplishment' (Holt, 1995: 1).

Both ideas of social dislocation and social location of the self that we have presented support, to differing degrees, the importance of the notion of self formed through consumption differentiation. The self is constructed within a dualistic schema and defined through its difference from the other. This is in keeping with Derrida's (1978, 1981) view of interpretation as arising through the construction of opposite terms. In line with this theory we will argue that identities, in a similar fashion to terms, are inter-penetrated with meaning deriving from its absent (implicitly present) opposite. Identities, defined through opposition, therefore

remain fragile or undecided. This is because both terms are negotiated as either term is revised or extended. Despite, or perhaps because of this fluid boundary, the opposition of terms and identities can be maintained. Differentiation can therefore be explained, whether it operates at the group or individual level, through constructed structures of opposition, marked in part through consumption, while the fluidity and inter-penetration of dualistic systems account for changing expressions of identity. The increased pace of that change draws us back to question the viability of sign experimentation or domination.

During the theoretic frenzy that characterized the early debate about the forging of the individual, there remained a lack of empirical examples of consumers (Miller, 1995). We aim to contribute to the growing evidence by drawing upon our two pieces of research looking at young consumers. Our focus is upon how they story their identity, their affiliation and difference. The material that we collected leads the analysis. In this paper we draw together and comment upon material relating 'the self' (as seen and explained by 'the self') to conspicuous objects of consumption, primarily clothing. Our analysis is, however, underpinned by ongoing debates concerning first, the consumer paradox whereby individuality is experienced and marked through a shared code, and second, the sociality or individuality of identity. Through our commentary and in our discussion we relate the experience of our participants to these theoretical debates. We will now introduce these participants and our methodology.

Research methods and participants

Our empirical material is drawn from two studies which were funded by members of the retail industry. These funders wanted to look at the lives of young, educated adults whom they saw as likely to be in the vanguard of lifestyle changes over the forthcoming period. Accordingly, they requested that we studied undergraduates (study one) and recently graduated professionals (study two). The question the retailers posed was: 'how do people in these groups "live their lives"?' That is, they wanted a deep, contextual understanding that would illuminate the activities, mundane or otherwise, in which young adults engaged, and how young adults use products and services to support their social and working lives. They wanted to reveal the participants' understandings of their lives and hence favoured an inductive study with no formal boundary to the scope of the investigation. This would allow the emergence of aspects highlighted as important by participants, rather than pre-specified according to any theoretically derived understanding. The study was thus holistic: the use of consumption in the forging of identity and individuality emerged as important to the people we studied and hence is the focus of this paper.

The research question guided us towards ethnographic and narrative methods. Traditional ethnographic methods involve 'careful and usually long-term observation' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999: 561) generally occurring in a single locale (Marcus, 1998) and through which the ethnographer develops an understanding

of social life in that context. Narrative methods, on the other hand, examine participants' 'stories, commentaries and conversations' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999: 561) in order to better grasp how those participants make sense of their world and develop and sustain a sense of the self (Bruner, 1986; McAdams, 1996). In practice, elements of the two research approaches are often seen in combination (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999) and we drew on elements of both according to their ability to address our question.

We chose therefore to combine repeated phone conversations with written narratives and, finally, a triadic interview to which each participant brought a close friend or family member (see Figure 1). This allowed us to follow individual participants across many and varied contexts of their lives, removing the constraint that locale often poses to ethnography. It allowed us to access and converse with participants in-situ and over a period of time, thus providing higher levels of engagement with the participants and avoiding the retrospective perspective that is often found in narrative research. Diversity characterized our combination of data collection methods. Reaching people at different times, in different contexts and at times with other people present allowed contradictions to emerge and 'truths' to be negotiated. These occurred where either a participant highlighted seemingly discordant accounts of themselves or where a participant's account was not entirely accepted by a close friend. Throughout the process we valued rapport (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and conversation (Douglas, 1985; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997) above methodological exactitude; we now reflect briefly upon the use of each method.

Initially, each participant wrote five brief stories about purchasing something; no fuller instructions were given. Although written stories have sometimes been seen as fabrication that lacks the realism that is required in conversation (Whitty,

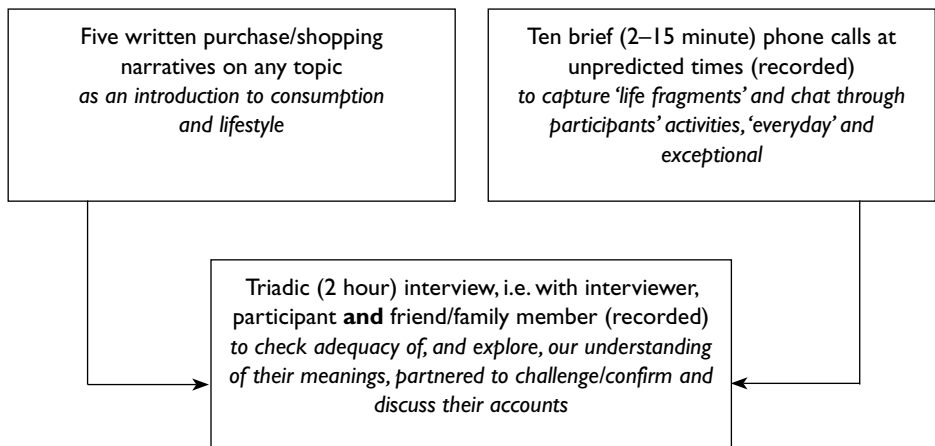


Figure 1

Data collection methods

2002), comparison across stories of different forms leads Whitty (2002) to argue that written narratives are powerful vehicles allowing the narrators to foreground and outline what they see as highly salient aspects of the self. We agree, since we found that a half-page narrative was indeed used to emphasize an aspect of the self (such as being smart or cheapskate) that recurred throughout conversation with that participant.

For the repeated telephone conversations, participants agreed a broad timeframe in which we could call them. Hence calls were made at times they could not predict throughout the day and evening on weekdays and also at weekends. In accordance with our emic approach, traditional salutations were followed by the opening question 'So, what are you doing?' Subsequent conversation 'questions' were derived from the answers given (see, for example, Thompson and Haytko, 1997). These unanticipated moments were intended to capture what we termed 'life fragments' – it enabled us to contact each participant in diverse contexts and to focus conversation around in-situ reports of their activity. In practice, we accessed participants during many activities and in many moods (and levels of sobriety). With employers' permission some phone calls were taken at work. Our participants used mobile phones as a matter of course so that, it seemed to us, the conversations assumed the status of an unremarkable occurrence in both the researcher's and participant's life. The phone calls produced a 'quasi soap-opera'³ effect through which we began to see emerging themes, and the researcher felt that a degree of 'intimacy', necessary for the ethnographic element, was achieved. For example, the researcher came to vicariously 'know' the friends to which a participant repeatedly referred; plans for the evening were discussed in one conversation and deviation from those plans was often discussed in the next.

The research culminated in a triadic interview with the participant and either a close friend or family member and researcher. Ongoing analysis throughout the period of data collection meant that we had identified what we saw as important themes. We had drawn together material relating to these themes and had developed an understanding of them. The interviews followed ethnographic interview principles (Spradley, 1979), whereby we sought to fine-tune and enrich our understanding of key themes from each participant's perspective through questioning and discussion. Just as we have argued that spoken and written material may differ, equally we accept that diverse versions of the self may be presented in a face-to-face interview and in phone conversations. We might expect this diversity to be further complicated by the presence of a friend with 'other' understandings of the participant. The triadic interview was therefore intended to allow the possibility of identity negotiation and did indeed at times demonstrate this through challenges and collaborations within the triad. In this way the sequential data collection, and iterative movement between data collection and analysis, allowed us to take account of the 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens, 1984), especially through the final triadic interview which allowed us to clarify both their and our understandings of key themes.

The undergraduates volunteered their participation during a teaching seminar; the researcher involved in data collection did not hold a teaching role with respect

Table 1

Participants' chosen pseudonyms (in alphabetical order)

Study	Participants
Female undergraduates:	Aurora ; Cameron; Honey Reed ; Jane; Lins; Shakara and Tessa
Male undergraduates:	Alan ; Anantha ; Bill ; Brazil; Dirk McNish; Fat Boy Jim ; Ian ; and Johnny Brigante
Female employed graduates:	Chris (tine); Gee; Joanne Black ; Monkeyball ; Shane; and Victoria Plum
Male employed graduates:	David; Glen; Kieran ; Klint Smith ; Krimbow; and Macca

to the students. Data collection took place over the university vacation so that participants were dispersed across the UK at the time: some were in casual employment, others in internships and others were not working. The working graduates responded to invitations placed in appropriate 'habitats': particular coffee bars, gymnasiums, a singles club and an outdoor sports shop frequented by individuals of this age. Following Barbara Stern (1998: 76), participants were asked to choose pseudonyms (see Table 1) that were used throughout the study to ensure that participant anonymity was fully preserved.

Concerns have frequently been expressed that student samples represent a pragmatic choice for the academic researcher but poorly reflect phenomena amongst a non-student population (see, for example, Bergmann and Grahn, 1997; Kimmel, 2001). In the earlier of our two studies, we chose to work with students because they are a sizeable group that are of intrinsic interest to consumer studies and to industry (as shown by the commitment of our sponsors). Participants from both studies came from a range of social backgrounds and are 'examples' (Newholm, 2005) of young educated consumers with relatively high future social aspirations, because of their educational status. While both studies were roughly balanced by gender, we do not regard them as a sample of some generalized population. Participants who are quoted in this paper are indicated in bold, but our ideas are developed through consideration of the full corpus of data.

A dedicated follower of individual preference

In our first approach to the empirical material we look at how our participants use clothing to construct individuality. We discuss extracts that present the idea of individual preference, giving detail to these preferences to varying extents. However, this notion distances 'the self' from the mass choices made by a generalized other. Thus they construct and claim the self as the source of original choice. We will

argue that this construction of the self as individual is accomplished through the discursive production of identity 'traits', which provide the rationale for individual choice.

In the following extracts Alan and Ian reject the mass merchandise of fashion, and assert individuality through vaguely expressed preferences. Yet both reveal the fragility of their position. Alan distances himself from the notion of a shopping trip, which might be associated with 'fashion', and makes his purchases incidental. However, he introduces and acknowledges contradiction in his narration of brand through the words 'saying that'.

When it comes to style, I don't really consider myself a particularly stylish person – I just tend to wear what I like. If I go out looking for clothes, I'll usually come back empty handed but I always see something I want to buy when I'm not looking. I'm not overly concerned with having the 'right labels'; I'll get something if I think it's good. Saying that, there are only a few types of trainers I would consider buying. (*Alan*)

Further consideration of Alan's data shows his choice to be complicated by his adolescent group affiliations. He explains that he has been an enthusiastic 'skater' and describes the increasingly baggy (not flared) trousers that skaters favour, to which he was exposed. What he likes now, as an undergraduate and infrequent skater, are jeans that are full but not 'extreme' and trainers that afford 'brand' continuity with his skateboarding past but do not go to the skateboarding excesses that would compromise his student present. In this way, we see 'what Alan likes' as the result of the negotiation of styles as life changes move him between different social groups.

Through his interjection of 'I just tend to wear what I like', and his later assertion that 'I'll get something if I think it's good', Alan was able to assert his preference without specificity and also mobilized the idea of serendipity as the means through which he accomplished *his* style. In this sense he sets himself apart from the 'stylish person', seeking and buying the 'right labels' according to some unspecified dictate, while avoiding rigid self-definition. However, Alan simultaneously undermines his self determinism through the qualifying words of his language. The term 'I don't *really* consider' introduces uncertainty. While in the phrase 'I just tend to', 'just' suggests a lack of importance about the issue of clothing, while 'tend' introduces variability (sometimes I do and sometimes I don't) suggesting that something undefined but other than individual preference may guide his choices. We therefore see Alan constructing himself as a relatively passive and partially successful asserter of choice driven by an autobiography of skater-to-student. Additionally, through the serendipity of the purchase, he possibly maintains a gendered aspect of otherness that has wide currency, by distancing himself from the feminized activity of shopping (Rinaldo, 2007).

Echoing the precarious character of self determinism, Ian introduces himself as not '*really*' a follower of fashion but one whose liking for designer clothing inadvertently drags him into the world of branding.

I don't really follow fashions but do like to buy designer clothes. [...] Just jeans and tops and things, various trousers but I just like the quality, I think they hang nicer. It's not just because

of the names, I don't like tops with big names splattered all over them, I won't wear those but I don't mind the little things, they are always going to have those on them. (*Ian*)

Ian explains his preference for designer goods as arising from a love of 'quality' legitimized in the vague attribute of 'hang'. Ian can then characterize his purchase of any 'branded' clothing, the signifier of 'quality', as unavoidable and reluctantly made. He 'surrenders' to the smaller brand marks that he accepts as a necessary irritant that is inescapable since they will 'always be', marking the continuing semiotic challenge of the consumer environment. Ian thus constructs himself as ably selecting clothing based on his personal appreciation and understanding of quality. In this, his use of the mass signifiers of branding is incidental and somewhat regrettable but not too troublesome.

The precariousness of individuality is demonstrated also in a telephone extract from a conversation with Joanne and an interview extract with Monkeyball. Joanne's extract focuses upon 'the other', the wearer of 'crappy' clothes, whereas Monkeyball shows her own, curtailed, efforts to claim individuality through exclusive clothing.

Moderator: So it's important how you're seen?

Joanne: It is important, yes.

Moderator: Why is that?

Joanne: I hate wearing crappy clothes, I just hate it, I have to, I'm really obsessed with clothes, I really am. I have been since I was at university I think.

Joanne constructs individuality through difference from 'the other'. She does not say, for instance, that she loved wearing wonderful clothes, rather she *emphasized* how much she hated 'crappy clothes' foregrounding 'the otherness' or that which she is not. At the same time she suggests precariousness. She does not say 'I would hate' but 'I hate' suggesting that she is somehow constrained or forced towards the disliked other. This may invoke the idea of a battle fought or effort made to claim the desired self and avoid that disliked. Individuality arises by establishing a difference, but is accompanied by a fear of being unable to maintain this difference.

Having found a 'little black dress' she liked, Monkeyball had overspent and had to return it. What is interesting, however, is her construction of individuality in recounting this episode in the interview.

There is only a few of them, it was from a designer place and there was only a few of them so nobody else will have one. [...] I don't know what it was called actually. [...] Just a little place in the corner of Debenhams. What was the place called I took the dress back to? [aside to friend] It was somebody's name. Somebody's name, I think it began with L. (*Monkeyball*)

The term 'little black dress' taps into the classic good design myth, transcending fashion. Monkeyball's reasoning rests on her wish to possess an article that is not widely available and she distances the purchase from the ephemera of mass merchandising. Such a narrative might have been coupled with a couture house. However, the conversation takes an unexpected turn (Ochs and Capps, 2001) in which the vendor is forgotten and described unflatteringly. Monkeyball's individuality rests delicately on a myth, a vague brand recollection and some notion of limited production.

Finally, in looking at claims of individuality we turn to Aurora who narrates a strategy unique among the younger participants. Like the others, she saw herself as clear about what clothes she wanted though she was able to describe these wants more precisely than our other participants. For example she seeks: 'black trousers [...] seriously flared [and not] shiny'. Aurora also provides an account of her shopping activity in which she presents herself as dedicated to the task of finding 'the different'. The strategy she adopts is to buy 'cheap yet funky', often from shops marketed at younger girls (the teen market) and this type of clothing was, she said, not branded. Aurora's extract suggests the 'fun' and challenge of the search for the serendipitous – the enjoyment of being the self who engages in this activity to assert itself.

Anyone that knows me will tell you that I am a bit of a cheap-skate when it comes to clothes – I hate spending loads of money on individual items – not that I mind if I spend loads on quite a few things! I frequently root through charity shops, bargain bins and sale rails – in fact hardly anything I own was bought at full price – even down to my CD player, TV and record player – a complete bargain at £10.00! (*Aurora*)

Aurora creates difference partly by deprecating herself as a 'cheap-skate' while simultaneously displaying pride in the notoriety this status brings amongst 'everyone' she knows. Others, we may infer, spend considerable sums on single items. By contrast she enjoys and is able to combine non-branded items in a 'funky' way. Time spent rooting through clothes in atypical outlets establishes her as making choices. By eschewing the prescriptiveness of branding, and employing the vagueness of 'funk', the question of a relationship to fashion hardly arises. We can, however, question the extent to which Aurora's strategy, which apparently subverts fashion, actually escapes the code established by the fashion market (to paraphrase Kozinets, 2002). In her intentional turn to the world of 'teen shopping' she may be moving into a sub-section of the fashion market, with its own system of communication largely rejected by her cohort. Bargain rails and charity shops are also not 'fashionless' but fuelled by former waves of fashion. Therefore, Aurora, the participant with the clearest articulation of a shopping and consuming individualistic strategy, can be seen as achieving this within a broader and more widely accepted *language* of fashion, where not just any items will do.

While we might question the success with which individuality is claimed, the point that we wish to make is that their accounts are rhetorical, narrative devices that more or less successfully distinguish personal preferences from vaguely framed fashion, stylishness or the world of prescriptive brands. The construction of individuality is an important strand, either explicit or implicit, in the stories through which many of these young people account for their consumption choices – especially with respect to clothing.

The young people we researched presented themselves as being more-or-less capable practitioners on the borders of the fashion world. Each presents a vision of personal clothes choice that is fundamental to establishing who they are and who they are not. The 'mass' to whom, by implication, fashion is directed, is constructed as the other from whom the self is fashioned through rejection. In this sense we might say that, without explicit recognition, they successfully negotiated the para-

dox of consumption through narratives that accomplish individuality, to their own satisfaction, within the world where widely available goods denote different types of people. Yet, the fragility evident in the way some phrase their claims of individual choice gives support to the problems that this paradox poses.

By emphasizing personal choice our participants inadvertently echo the rational decision maker of the economists' model of consumption. As 'consumer choosers' (Gabriel and Lang, 2006), their rationale differs. Alan's rests on an implicit negotiation between fashions, Ian's upon quality, Aurora's upon bargain and funk, Joanne's upon the not-crappy, Monkeyball's upon the myth of classic clothing, yet each provides a rational account of their choice. To this we would add an overarching motivation – the construction of individuality – but we note that the establishment of a rationale is an important aspect of that individuality. By our reading, in claiming a particular rationale, our participants validate the notion of individuality, since this appears to be lodged in an essential characteristic, rather than presenting it as a (post-modern) whim.

Individuality and the 'Other'

We previously associated construction of individuality with construction of generalized 'otherness'. In this section we look initially at the importance of construction of 'the other' primarily through product choice. We then look at particular devices used to give some definition to the other. In turn these devices include various uses of location, evocation of the family and mode of purchase.

Anantha demonstrates the importance of being able to develop a clear idea of the other in order to be able to describe the self. He had no compunction about giving his views on fashion and seeing himself as on one 'side of the fashion fence'; we can see (trainer-loving, skateboarding) Alan as on the other side.

I think there are many different forms of fashion. Some people tend to find that looking scruffy is a sort of fashionable thing as well but I tend to be the more smart side of the fashion fence where I prefer wearing shoes to trainers, that sort of thing. [...] I have always been quite different to friends because a lot of them generally agree I am the smartest one out of the lot. I would prefer to wear a suit than get away with wearing jeans, you know. (*Anantha*)

Anantha's construction of the other draws on comparisons of shoes with trainers and suits with jeans. He establishes, then, the criteria that mark himself out as smart. However, the comparison that we have made with Alan is interesting, since Anantha replicates much of the uncertainty and insecurity of Alan's speech. In particular, having constructed two groups that are apparently clearly divided by the metaphoric fence, membership of the group is a matter of 'tendency'. This implies chance and change, and destabilizes the divide. The arbitrary and fragile nature of a constructed duality is seemingly felt by both Anantha and Alan while both privilege different elements. They self-consciously and precariously position themselves on one or other side of a divide that is always open to movement.

Fragility is further emphasized as Anantha expands upon his explanation of smart/not smart. Here Anantha's thoughts are themselves shown to be fragile (I

tend to think) while smartness itself is ultimately tied to the realm of idiosyncratic thought (having your *own* idea).

I tend to think that smartness comes out of the fact that, a lot of the time people wear clothes that are a few sizes too big and things like that, and I think smart clothes tend to be clothes that fit well, that have been made to fit, and it is really just having your own idea of what you look good in. (*Anantha*)

From these extracts we see that construction of the other is important to produce and support a vision of the self despite the arbitrary and unstable character of the me/them division. Several participants give form to and evidence of the other by giving the other a physical location. Shopping location can serve well in this context. We have already seen that Aurora's 'funkiness' comes from charity and teen shops. Chris subscribes to a 'funkiness' also constructed through the location of shopping and asserts its 'originality' through comparison with the shopping habitats and consequent style of her friends.

I feel like I've got an original funky style so I hunt out things that are different. [...] My friends tend to go for more high street stuff. I'll look for charity shop bargains as well as designer label bargains. I'll mix it up [...] don't like to wholesale buy an image. (*Chris*)

Though Chris buys contemporary designer clothes she is able to present herself as 'different' from other consumers. She does this by speaking of a 'wholesale image' offered by retailers in 'high street' shops. What is important to our argument is not Chris's anti-ensamblist (see Corrigan, 1997) 'mix and match' approach but her construction of the 'other' through a widespread practice associated with the mass location of shopping.

Shopping venue is also raised by Victoria to differentiate the self from others. In one of the telephone calls, Victoria was 'shopping' at a large, out-of-town shopping centre. It was Sunday and the researcher gained the impression that the visit was instigated by the female friend she was accompanying. The centre was crowded and nothing was bought. Victoria suggested to the researcher that 'some people' treat a Sunday visit to the shopping centre as a 'day out'. When asked if that was how she saw their trip she replies 'no not rea... what, [lowers register] a day trip to the Trafford Centre,⁴ no [laughs intermittently for 5 seconds]'. We think the fall in pitch of Victoria Plum's voice to deliver this opinion is very telling. Whether or not Victoria really believed others treat shopping at this mall as a day out, we can view this as a linguistic device through which Victoria establishes her story of difference.

An alternative use of location sees clothes as denoting a particular 'origin' or 'place of residence'. In these accounts our participants draw upon stereotyping and simultaneously produce Baudrillardian scale totalizations.⁵ Kieran's smartness is constructed by contrast to tackiness. In a telephone conversation he assured the researcher:

I'm not a fashion victim. I don't go for the Hawaiian shirts that they've brought out this year, I think it's just tacky. It's a real townie, scally look you know, it's not me. You know, I like to dress smart, I don't want to be classed as a Salford scally going round town, I'd get more grief. I go for things that are fairly simple, plain or whatever, you know. (*Kieran*)

In Kieran's speech we can see that the other is constructed in a very specific way. As a Mancunian (Manchester resident), his story draws upon locality and highlights a locally accepted view of two adjoining towns. Social standing is asserted through the divide between Salford (poor and scally⁶), Manchester (more affluent and smart) divide. The introduction of the self as not a fashion victim takes on an interesting dimension as he claims that, with a certain image, 'I'd get more grief'. This suggests that victimhood can quite literally be associated with certain fashions through their link with particular social groups summarized by location. During our conversations in Kieran's small rented flat, he expressed aspirations to important employment in the UN. He presented himself currently as a talented but undervalued social sector manager. Kieran can be seen as using this clothing narrative to give credence to his intentions to rise out of the 'townie' mass.

Stereotyping is used also in Honey Reed's association of locality and identity. Again, totalizations are employed as Honey Reed claims individuality in a written reflection: 'Important to me to have my own style. Don't like coming back to [where I was brought up], as everyone dresses similar and lose your identity [sic].⁷ There was nothing apparent from the researcher's visit to the town for the interview with Honey Reed that marked it out as uniquely conformist. Rather, Honey Reed's narrative served to emphasize her individuality through a fear of conformity. By rejecting a style she associates with the location where she was brought up Honey Reed asserts her independence and differentiates her identity in the family.

Other attempts to claim a differentiated identity in the family include Aurora's approach to make up:

So I am constantly on the look out for new make-up – it has to fit a basic criteria though – inexpensive, sparkly/shiny/glossy, and different. Not for me the errors of my sisters who have about 12 different variations of the same colour – boring! (*Aurora*)

Once the sociologist's misunderstanding of 'sisters' was clarified in the interview, the 'other' narrowed to her siblings (as opposed to a greater feminist sisterhood). By saying that she is 'constantly on the look out', Aurora implies exacting standards, selectiveness and skill. By combining the specific attributes 'sparkly/shiny/glossy' with the vague 'different', she suggests an individual creativity. She can then contrast this with her sisters' selection as less taxing, restricted and conventional.

Klint addresses the dilemma of constructing individuality through the purchase of objects others buy with an alternative individualizing narrative. He constructs *his* purchase of a new Alfa Romeo as different from others' car purchases: 'It's not 'this is the latest fad, I want this car', it's, you know, it is a ... it's an appreciation'. In this case Klint's Alfa is not claimed to be any different from other purchases of the same model – the physical product is the same. It is the mode of purchase, which he initially has some problem articulating, that allows him to narrate difference. 'Appreciation' was fleshed out as having followed the development of the car model from its first public mention to the point of purchase. Having prior knowledge of its specification, others can then be characterized as mere followers of fads.

It seems to us that our participants were handling the paradox that 'individuality depends upon social conformity' (Bauman, 1991: 201) by employing a range of

quite different consumption stories. Anantha does this by sartorial elegance; Chris by mixing recognized 'signs'; Kieran by timeless classics; Honey Reed by non-conformity; Klint by fetishizing the purchase. These participants explain diverse elements in sufficient detail to convey meaning to us and combine these elements to produce a logical coherence, thus constructing credible narratives⁷ in which self is marked by difference from a mass other: the slovenly dressers, those who buy a wholesale image, those who conform, and those who buy the latest fad. These credible narratives produce a vision of individuality without fixing that vision as being other than somehow different. Simultaneously, the mass other is given some definition and their existence proved through aspects such as the location in which they shop or live or their motivation to purchase. These definitions are, however, imprecise so that the detail of the distinction between the self and other remains unfixed and open to revision. The distinctions are not claimed in such detail as to invite question or become incredible.

Individual but not isolated

We have so far examined the importance for our participants of being able to claim individuality and mark the self out from a generalized and often stereotyped other. However, in our previous discussion of the consumption literature we noted that the individuation thesis (Giddens, 1984; Beck, 1999) competes with alternative readings of contemporary society that stress social membership. Both Cova and Cova (2002) and Kozinets (2002) note that ostensibly individualistic uses of consumer symbols take on particular values within and through their association with particular sub-cultures. We follow Thomas (1998), who advocates the presentation of alternative readings of data, to look in this section at how social membership is demonstrated in our participants' narratives and at the limits that these narratives set to individuality.

Recognition by others of their use of clothing does seem important to participants. For example Aurora asserts that everyone who knows her will see her as a cheapskate and Anantha asserts that his friends would see him as smart. Such narratives of individuality do not isolate the teller. However, our participants did not generally lodge their stories of consumption within any framework of fashion or associate the self with neo-tribes of consumption (Cova, 1997).

During their interview, Fat-Boy-Jim's girlfriend points out that, because of living in a busy student flat, one might be expected to possess considerable brand knowledge: 'what is in and what is out'. Implicitly she evokes an idea of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) by relating knowledge to style within the world of the student. Rocamora (2002: 359) highlights the very temporary nature of consumer symbolism, arguing that in conditions of product proliferation fashion has insufficient 'time to settle and allow clear strategies of class differentiation to be expressed'. The temporary currency of style is perhaps suggested by the girlfriend's reference to the 'busy' character of the flat, which implies a rapid churn of knowledge. This churn may account for the elusiveness of groups or neo-tribes of consumption in our data. Inhabitants of the busy student flats may indeed be busy re-resolving the

consumer paradox by fixing and revising the self within the rewriting of meaning offered by a rapid succession of consumer goods.

Some extracts do illustrate an attempt to associate the self with particular consumer groups and the difficulties that this may entail. In most respects: business orientation; present income; conventionality; and career aspirations, one would expect the Alfa-owning Klint to opt for 'smart' clothing. His story, however, is of a fashion world that has become less formal and has adopted jeans as acceptable clothing. In the interview with Klint, he was wearing his new Diesel jeans and he highlights the dual interpretation of the jeans:

These are the purchase. I may look like a mechanic that has got rust all over them. [...] Like a rusty zebra pattern. [...] I think probably it is fair to say I have never paid more than about £55 or £60 for a pair of jeans before and yeah, they kind of ... these were £110 but that was unbeknown to us, well to me. I thought they looked nice, I tried them on, fantastic, good fit, oh hold on that's actually double what I normally pay. And I did step back and it did take all of 24 hours before I made the purchase so I did leave and they didn't come with us but the next day, well overnight. (*Klint*)

Like Alan and Ian, Klint cited 'good fit'. Klint was asked if he could have bought a pair of jeans to fit for somewhat less money.

That is very true, yes, I could have done. It is not as if they are a decorated label, I don't think you pay much for the label either, it's more as you say, the kind of faded look. It's [the label] just discreet, just there. [...] I can wear them with a nice shirt and shoes and go somewhere posh because they are in fashion rather than turning up in a pair of faded grubby looking jeans and they say 'go home'. (*Klint*)

We were interested in how the smart Klint could arrive 'somewhere posh' in simulated mechanic's jeans. 'And there is a hole in the back pocket', Klint added to the conundrum. People will be able to recognize the difference?

Yes, that it's more by design than by accident, that you haven't tried to do it yourself, you paid the money for it. [...] Those that I have seen have been of the same make and you can notice. (*Klint*)

Klint skilfully negotiates his way between the 'decorated label' and that which is 'just discreet, just there' and rejects the idea that one pays for the label but confirms the notion that consumer culture *must* be bought to be considered legitimate. He remains highly dependent on social recognition of the clearly arbitrary code of 'smartness' whereby scruffy simulations have (momentarily) become the sign of smartness. In an interesting twist, Klint enlists 'fashion' as an ally against convention.

It has become more accepted, fashion is such a strong thing and if they start saying you can't come in here wearing something that is such the height of fashion then obviously they are excluding X number of clients but they'll find something else to pull you up on no doubt. There will always be a reason but yeah, it has become more accepted that you can go out in them now. (*Klint*)

From these extracts we note that Klint draws upon a code that circulates within a particular field although the jeans are worn away from that context (for example,

in the interview). The audience of primary concern is associated with clubs and the never-defined 'they' who police matters of fashion.

Other extracts demonstrate the use of signs valued in specific contexts to order, either to gain admittance or to mark membership of particular groups. Consumption of particular styles therefore marks stages in participants' lives. Alan had previously associated himself with 'skater' culture; likewise, Chris as a student had been 'a bit more Grungie' wearing 'crochet tops that had holes in them and slashed jeans' so that 'nothing was perfect nothing was stylish'. Since becoming a voluntary sector worker, Chris saw her demonstration of oppositional values as being replaced by more 'style'. As we have seen, her clothes are still a mixture of new designer wear and charity shop, but the holes and slashes have gone (ironically, at the moment when her contemporary, Klint, adopts these very features). With a regular salary and life-style changes that now include dinner parties with friends and less clubbing, Chris sometimes frequents the more expensive designer shops.

It has been noted elsewhere (Solomon and Anand, 1985; Costello, 2004) that changing clothes choices are an important feature of personal transitions and especially entry into work. Just as Chris commented upon styles of dress she acquired in making the transition into work, the purchase of new areas of clothing mark this forthcoming transition for many of the student cohort. Bill is concerned with the way his suit, a new object of consumption, talks to a new audience; he is eager to show his competence with a different code:

Certain people would recognise the brand but not necessarily people in my [student] group. I guess big businessmen would recognise it, it's a tailored suit so yes, certain people would but I didn't buy it necessarily for that, it has got no obvious labels on it but I just liked it because, well, yes, I guess I am buying into that. It is an aspirational purchase as opposed to, I mean I am aspiring to be a businessman, I am not aspiring to pose, you see what I mean? I am not buying it to say, look at the label on this item I'm wearing or this item I'm carrying. [...] It marks you out as being more discerning I think. (*Bill*)

In this narrative Bill seeks to reconcile aspirational membership of the 'select' business community, as signified by his description of this *particular* suit, while pre-empting unwanted interpretations of his motives. Throughout our contacts with him Bill expresses a wish to manage his own significant business but as a 'social entrepreneur'. A suit would be needed as part of what Bill took to be the accoutrements of business; an aid to being taken seriously. Bill's narrative is interrupted by frequent movement between incomplete phrases (I just liked it because, well, yes), juxtaposition of ideas without explicit links (I guess big businessmen would recognize it, it's a tailored suit) and repeated use of the uncertain 'I guess'. These hesitant features demonstrate, we believe, the challenge of maintaining a biography through the tensions of transition. Consumption in this case enables Bill to gain and mark membership in a new social group of which he has, as yet, only a partial vision and vague understanding.

Our participants do not explicitly define the self as members of any particular cultural groups and are eager to present consumption choices as their own and as marking their individuality. We have noted that avoidance to tie the self explicitly to neo-tribes of consumption may arise within a general picture of instability and

rapid fashion change. Consumption groupings may be seen as massively unstable and therefore a precarious base on which to construct a sense of self. Nevertheless, participants tell of consumption trends associated with particular social groupings, some that are oppositional and others that are more traditional. In either case the conventions of the group are of concern. Abilities to understand and communicate within the arbitrary codes of the group are prized. These individuals wanted, at times and in certain contexts, to be recognized as members of a notional group although the groups remained enigmatic in the narratives. Individuality is foregrounded; at times groups can be employed to explain and describe the self but the self is not constructed and projected primarily through reference to group membership.

Conclusions

Our data collection methods and close examination of these conversations was intended to give primacy to participants' interpretations of their worlds. The dominant consumer characterization of uniqueness is taken as a rhetorical device. Similar consumer reasoning – combining products 'imaginatively', buying 'special' brands, breaking fashion rules – can be found in positivistic approaches (e.g., Tian, 2001). Our concern has been not to distil and measure 'real' attitudes but to explore consumers' stories as they reveal an understanding of the self, noting that consumer rhetoric may seem at odds with the researchers' perception. Taking this stance we sought to address several questions raised by previous literatures. These were: is a sense of self and of individuality forged through the consumption of widely available goods? What part does differentiation from others play in forging this sense of self? What part is played by association with others?

We have shown consumption, especially relating to clothes, to be an important element through which people generate an understanding of the self. Our work substantiates and illuminates the consumer paradox in several ways. In presenting the self as a consumer of clothing, our participant narratives are dominated by visions of individuality and uniqueness. The consumer paradox is then evident in their efforts to construct individuality through their participation in mass markets. Broadly speaking, the paradox is accommodated in the consumers' stories. Some stories seemed accomplished, even delivered with some panache. Others are more precarious; assertions of individuality are punctuated with qualifications, iterative corrections and rewordings to prevent collapse. Nevertheless, the notion of uniqueness is maintained.

Claims to individuality carry with them implicit or explicit statements of agency. Individuality is supported by portrayal of the self as chooser. Many narratives individualize purchases through asserting the role of chooser and associating choice with an implied basis of rationale, even though this may be vague (funky, grungie, smart, appreciative of fit). The rationale that explains choice, or rather stories choice into the purchase, may not draw on any intrinsic quality of the product or even product combination. For example, many onlookers would be unable

to discern that Klint *appreciated* his Alfa rather than buying it as a fad. We see therefore that the stories are in large part introspective – relevant to the extent that they present a satisfactory explanation to the storyteller. Making a rational choice according to one's own criteria is, we would argue, important in maintaining individuality. Thus, in answer to the first broad question we raised, we do see that the consumption of widely available goods is used to create a sense of self, and indeed of individuality, accomplished through the narration of a choice rationale that marks out the consumer.

Previous literature led us to question also the part played by differentiation in the forging of self and our work highlights the importance of a generalized other. Notions of individual traits and therefore particular choice rationales arise within such dualities as 'smart'/'scruffy'; 'stylish'/'tacky'; 'appreciative user'/'fadist'; and 'funky'/'boring'. These dualities invariably privilege the narrator, positioning them as choice maker rather than fashion victim. It is noticeable that none of our participants seek to explain the self by fleshing out their qualities by comparison with like-minded others. The use of contrast through these structurings of the world is important in presenting uniqueness; other consumers figure generally as a means of supporting one's own individuality. At the most abstract level we found a widespread construction of a generalized undiscerning buying public, from which the narrators are differentiated. Several devices are used to give greater definition to the other. Locations are used in this respect to affirm the self as definitely different from largely unknown people.

In several cases (Anantha, Chris, and Aurora) even friends and family were enlisted in the role of 'other': the buyers of 'wholesale images', the 'less smart', or 'boring' conformists. In this way reference groups and the groups to which one is closely related were used to form otherness rather than appearing as communities with which participants share taste. Thus participants in general explained their lives and choice of consumption without reference to any notion of group identity. Our participants sought to story themselves out of the paradox by claiming both identity and individuality, and they invariably scripted others as having identity without individuality. The wholesale image of consumption conformity can itself be seen as adding an extra twist, a unique quality, to the individuality that participants claim for themselves – they are unique in being individual. The general avoidance of locating the self in a group also makes it easier to maintain flexibility and, we have argued, may be associated with the rapid churn of consumer goods that makes the fixing of identity precarious. Flexibility is afforded through dualistic systems since, as we have seen, the attributes are sufficiently vague to avoid examination, and yet mutually defining. Hence they are amenable to easy re-definition independent of changes in forms and in configurations of social groupings.

Exceptions to individualizing can be found. In Bill's narrative he wanted to story himself *into* a privileged business group. The smart Klint had to align himself with 'the fashionable' to get into posh places with simulated scruffy jeans. Clothing choices change as Alan moves from adolescent skater to student or Chris from radical student to social worker. Such stories demonstrate a concern to communicate with particular groups through their symbolic dress codes. However, and address-

ing the third question that arose from the literature, the part played by 'membership' of such groups appears ambivalently alongside protestations of individuality. The narratives present a relationship to 'groupness' that involves the occasional and temporary marking of membership where this is instrumental to the project of individuality, that is, to the development of biography and production of self. These young participants rarely felt it necessary to refer to social groups to give meaning to the story of self-identity or to communities that influenced their consumption choices.

Of course, 'I don't really follow fashions' should not be taken to signify a 'real' independence from fashion. We read these narratives as rhetorical individualizing acts that relate to participants' interpretations. Their practices might be recognized by others (including researchers) as conforming to some notional group. We have seen attempts to conceal code conformity through discreet branding without articulating the 'no-logo' movement documented by Naomi Klein (2000). We have also seen attempts to subvert the code through reference to an alternative reading (smart mechanics' jeans, funk, grunge). Some participants (Bill and Klint) have been eager to show themselves as competent communicators in a specific contextual code. Alongside all these we have heard repeated assertions of individual choice that operates independently of the strictures of the code. These assertions consistently reject an idea of sign dominance without demonstrating the exertions of experimentation. We feel that our data do not support the notion of class differentiation as presented by either Simmel (1972) or Bourdieu (1984). Rather, they support the relevance of code in consumption choice, the disconfirmation of which is in any case rendered difficult by Baudrillard's line of argument. However, despite the relevance of the code to choices, individuality is insistently foregrounded in participants' explanations.

Our data relate to a specific context both in terms of our research approach and our participants' environment. Given these provisos, our data offer a way of making an empirical link between the theories of 'sign-experimentation' and those of 'sign-dominance'. Consumers can simultaneously be self-narrated individual choosers while narrating others as hapless members of (temporary) style collectivities. Indeed, the accomplishment of the self as chooser is dependent upon the construction of the other as hapless. Conversely, those other individuals (and researchers) may observe our participants as members of style collectivities while, unknown to us, storying their own independence from 'the code' and their own individuality in ways very satisfactory to themselves. This possibility rests on the idea that the collectivity mostly resides in the semiotics of objects, whereas individuality is primarily narrated (this is supported by ideas of the biographical self; see for example Giddens, 1991). Representations of collectivities are ever present and widely available but in ordinary consumption they are only articulated strongly with reference to the other. Representations of individuality, that demand the marking out of the self from the collective, are narrated locally, in interpretive communities (Thompson and Haytko, 1997), but are rarely semiotically available in the ways the individual themselves would have narrated. Although the languages of objects and of social conversation must be co-constructive, in the cases we have presented,

semi-independent readings (I just wear what I like: the others are members of groups) allow some flexibility in negotiating this individual/collective paradox of consumption originally noted by Simmel (1972). While the negotiation of individuality remains precarious and embedded with this paradox of consumption, its accomplishment applies notions of sign domination to evoke the other in a story suggestive of individual sign experimentation.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Manchester Retail Research Forum for funding and supporting the study, and Prof. Peter McGoldrick for negotiating this opportunity and encouraging our work. We are also grateful to the three reviewers for their valuable contributions.

Notes

- 1 Arnould and Thompson (2005) have produced a useful review of this social constructivist approach in *Consumer Culture Theory*.
- 2 For a review, see 'identity seeker' in Gabriel and Lang, 2006.
- 3 The phone calls documented fragments of participants' lives and were sent to a transcriber on a daily basis. The transcriber started asking us questions about the 'storylines' (for example whether one of the participants had resolved a housing problem) and indicated that she had found those lives engaging and felt some loss as the stories ended. This demonstrated to us the power of the repeated calls to effectively conjure a 'life world'.
- 4 Trafford Centre is a large shopping mall in the North West of England.
- 5 Poster (1988: 7) argues that while Baudrillard rejects the structuralism of the modernists he 'totalizes his insights' to produce a grand theory of consumer culture.
- 6 A widely used local term of gentle abuse derived from the word scallywag.
- 7 Following Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988), we use the notion of a credible narrative to emphasize the construction of logical coherence that makes a narrative or theme credible, that is, capable of being believed. The term is consistent with continued conversational negotiation of meaning, since it is possible to see something as credible yet not true.

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